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The Poor

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once departed from his usual way of playing the sociological game. Not so. This is no social survey, such as Charles Booth's, which describes in detail the condition of the poor and tries to determine the "poverty line."<sup>3</sup> This is no effort, as of the American muck-rakers of that period, to bring about reform by exposing the horrors of life in the slum. It is simply the longest and most thorough analysis Simmel made of a particular problem in his *Soziologie*; he undertakes it in his usual way. One doubts whether Simmel ever visited Alexanderplatz. Lewis Coser, however, shows us the uses to which Simmel's style of work can be put by a sociologist who joins delight in sociological analysis with concern for social action.

In the course of playing his game with *The Poor*, Simmel does—as one

<sup>3</sup> *Life and Labour of the People of London*, 18 vols, London, 1892-1903.

would expect—give us some important theoretical observations. Sociologists generally deal with deviation as departure from norms in but one direction. In fact, it is common for deviations in either direction to be disapproved of. A person—although Simmel does not say so in this connection—may work too much, be too good, or too modest. The saints—who practice the ordinary virtues in heroic degree—are often stoned before they are canonized. It is just such adding of another, unexpected dimension to analysis that makes Simmel so intriguing. I read Simmel not so much for what he may say about religion, law, or poverty—although that may be very rewarding—as for these ideas, these additional dimensions which make the study of all aspects of society one enterprise, both useful and intellectually delightful.

## THE POOR

GEORG SIMMEL

*Translated by Claire Jacobson\**

Insofar as man is a social being, to each of his obligations there corresponds a right on the part of others. Perhaps even the more profound conception would be to think that originally only rights existed; that each individual has demands which are of a general human character and the result of his particular condition, and which afterward become the obligations of others. But since every person

with obligations in one way or another also possesses rights, a network of rights and obligations is thus formed, where right is always the primary element that sets the tone, and obligation is nothing more than its correlate in the same act and, indeed, an inevitable correlate.

Society in general may be regarded as a reciprocity of beings endowed with moral, legal, conventional, and many other kinds of rights. If these rights imply obligations for others, this is simply, so to speak, a logical or technical consequence; and if the unimaginable should happen—that is to say, if it were possible to satisfy every right in such a way that it would

\* Translated from Georg Simmel, "Der Arme," Chapter 7 in *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1908, pp. 454-493. I wish to thank Professor Juan J. Linz for his invaluable assistance in the preparation of this translation.

not imply the fulfillment of an obligation—society would in no way need the category of obligation. With a radicalism that certainly does not correspond to psychological reality but which could be developed in the sense of an ethical-ideal construction, one could interpret all the prestations of love and compassion, of generosity and religious impulse, as *rights* of the beneficiary. Ethical rigorism has already asserted, in the face of all these motivations, that the highest to which a man can aspire is to do his duty and that the fulfillment of duty requires by definition precisely that which a self-adulatory way of thinking considers a merit above duty. One more step from this ethical rigorism, and behind every duty of the person with an obligation, there is the right of the claimant; indeed, this seems to be the ultimate and most rational foundation on which the mutual prestations of men may be based.

A fundamental opposition between the sociological and ethical categories manifests itself here. Inasmuch as all relations of prestation are derived from a *right*—in the widest sense of this concept which includes, among other elements, legal right—the relationship between man and man has totally imbued the moral values of the individual and determined his course. However, in contrast to the undoubted idealism of this point of view, there is the no less deeply based rejection of any interindividual genesis of duty. Our duties (from this standpoint)—it is said—are duties only toward ourselves and there are no others. Their content may be the conduct toward other men, but their form and motivation as duty do not derive from others, but are generated with full autonomy by the self and its own purely internal demands, being independent of anything that lies outside of it. It is only in the case of right that the other is the *terminus a quo* of motivation in our moral ac-

tions, but for morality itself he is no more than the *terminus ad quem*. In the final analysis, we ourselves are the only ones responsible for the morality of our acts; we are responsible for them only to our better selves, to our self-esteem, or whatever we wish to call this enigmatic focus which the soul finds in itself as the final judge that decides freely up to what point the rights of others are obligations.

This fundamental dualism in the basic sentiments which govern the course of moral action is exemplified or empirically symbolized by various conceptions that exist in relation to assistance to the poor. The obligations we have toward the poor may appear as a simple correlate of the rights of the poor. Especially in countries where begging is a normal occupation, the beggar believes more or less naively that he has a right to alms and frequently considers that their denial means the withholding of a tribute to which he is entitled. Another and completely different characteristic—in the same category—implies the idea that the right to assistance is based on the group affiliation of the needy. One point of view according to which the individual is merely the product of his social milieu confers upon that individual the right to solicit from the group compensation for every situation of need and every loss. But even if such an extreme dissolution of individual responsibility is not accepted, one may stress, from a social viewpoint, that the rights of the needy are the basis of all assistance to the poor. For only if we assume such rights, at least as a socio-legal fiction, does it appear possible to protect public assistance from arbitrariness and dependence upon a chance financial situation or other uncertain factors. Everywhere the predictability of functions is improved whenever in the correlation between the rights and obligations that underlie them right constitutes the methodological point of

departure; for man, in general, is more easily disposed to demand a right than to fulfill an obligation.

To this may be added the humanitarian motive of making it easier for the poor person to request and accept assistance, when by doing so he only exercises his due right; for the humiliation, shame, and *déclassement* that charity implies are overcome for him to the extent that it is not conceded out of compassion or sense of duty or utility, but because he can lay claim to it. Since this right naturally has limits, which must be determined in each individual case, the right to assistance will not modify these motivations in the material quantitative aspect with respect to other motivations. By making it a right, its inner meaning is determined and is raised to a fundamental opinion about the relationship between the individual and other individuals and between the individual and the totality. The right to assistance belongs in the same category as the right to work and the right to life. It is true in this case that the ambiguity of the quantitative limits, which characterizes this as well as other "human rights," reaches its maximum, especially if assistance is in cash; for the purely quantitative and relative character of money makes it much more difficult objectively to delimit requests than assistance in kind—except in complex or highly individualized cases in which the poor person may make a more useful and fruitful application of money than of assistance in kind, with its providential character.

It is also unclear to whom the rights of the poor ought to be addressed, and the solution of this question reveals very deep sociological differences. The poor person who perceives his condition as an injustice of the cosmic order and who asks for redress, so to speak, from the entire creation will easily consider any individual who is in better circumstances than he jointly

liable for his claims against society. This leads to a scale which goes from the delinquent proletarian who sees in any well-dressed person an enemy, a representative of the "exploiting" class who can be robbed in good conscience, to the humble beggar who asks for charity "for the love of God," as though each individual had the obligation of filling the holes of the order which God desired but has not fully implemented. The poor man addresses his demands in this case to the individual; however, not to a specific individual, but to the individual on the basis of the solidarity of mankind. Beyond this correlation which allows any particular individual to appear as a representative of the totality of existence with respect to the demands directed to that totality, there are multiple particular collectivities to which the claims of the poor are addressed. The State, municipality, parish, professional association, circle of friends, family, may, as total entities, maintain a variety of relationships with their members; but each of these relationships appears to include an element which is manifested as the right to assistance in the event of impoverishment of the individual. This characteristic is the common element of such sociological relationships, although in other respects they are of highly heterogeneous character. The rights of the poor which are generated by such ties are curiously mixed under primitive conditions, where the individual is dominated by the tribal customs and religious obligations that constitute an undifferentiated unity. Among the ancient Semites, the right of the poor to participate in a meal is not associated with personal generosity, but rather with social affiliation and with religious custom. Where assistance to the poor has its *raison d'être* in an organic link between elements, the *rights* of the poor are more highly emphasized, whether their religious premise derives from a meta-

physical unity or their kinship or tribal basis from a biological unity. We will see, on the contrary, that when assistance to the poor derives teleologically from a goal one hopes to pursue in this way, rather than from the causal basis of a real and effective unity among all the members of the group, the rights of the poor dwindle to nothingness.

In the cases examined so far, a right and an obligation seemed to be two aspects of an absolute relationship. Completely new forms appear, however, when the point of departure is the obligation of the giver rather than the right of the recipient. In the extreme case, the poor disappear completely as legitimate subjects and central foci of the interests involved. The motive for alms then resides exclusively in the significance of giving for the giver. When Jesus told the wealthy young man, "Give your riches to the poor," what apparently mattered to him were not the poor, but rather the soul of the wealthy man for whose salvation this sacrifice was merely a means or symbol. Later on, Christian alms retained the same character; they represent no more than a form of asceticism, of "good works," which improve the chances of salvation of the giver. The rise of begging in the Middle Ages, the senseless distribution of alms, the demoralization of the proletariat through arbitrary donations contrary to all creative work, all these phenomena constitute the revenge, so to speak, that alms take for the purely subjectivistic motive of their concession—a motive which concerns only the giver but not the recipient.

As soon as the welfare of society requires assistance to the poor, the motivation turns away from this focus on the giver without, thereby, turning to the recipient. This assistance then takes place voluntarily or is imposed by law, so that the poor will not become active and dangerous enemies of society, so as to make their reduced

energies more productive, and so as to prevent the degeneration of their progeny. The poor man as a person, and the perception of his position in his own mind, are in this case as indifferent as they are to the giver who gives alms for the salvation of his own soul. In this case, the subjective egoism of the latter is overcome not for the sake of the poor, but for the sake of society. The fact that the poor receive alms is not an end-in-itself but merely a means to an end, the same as in the case of the man who gives alms for the sake of his salvation. The predominance of the social point of view with reference to alms is shown in the fact that the giving can be refused from that same social point of view, and this frequently happens when personal compassion or the unpleasantness of refusing would move us strongly to give.

Assistance to the poor, as a public institution, thus has a unique sociological character. It is absolutely personal; it does nothing but alleviate individual needs. In this respect, it differs from other institutions which pursue public welfare and security. These institutions attempt to fulfill the needs of all citizens: the army and police, the schools and public works, the administration of justice and the Church, popular representation and the pursuit of science are not, in principle, directed toward persons considered as differentiated individuals, but rather toward the totality of these individuals; the unity of many or all is the purpose of these institutions. Assistance to the poor, on the other hand, is focused in its concrete activity on the individual and his situation. And indeed this individual, in the abstract modern type of welfare, is the *final* action but in no way the *final purpose*, which consists solely in the protection and furtherance of the community. The poor cannot even be considered as a *means* to this end—which would improve their position—for social action does not make use of them,

but only of certain objective material and administrative means aimed at suppressing the dangers and losses which the poor imply for the common good. This formal situation is not only valid for the total collectivity, but also for smaller circles. Even within the family there are many acts of assistance, not for the sake of the recipient himself, but so that the family need not be ashamed and lose its reputation owing to the poverty of one of its members. The aid which English trade unions grant to their unemployed members does not purport so much to alleviate the personal situation of the recipient as to prevent that the unemployed, prompted by necessity, should work more cheaply and that this should result in lower wages for the entire trade.

If we take into consideration this meaning of assistance to the poor, it becomes clear that the fact of taking away from the rich to give to the poor does not aim at equalizing their individual positions and is not, even in its orientation, directed at suppressing the social difference between the rich and the poor. On the contrary, assistance is based on the structure of society, whatever it may be; it is in open contradiction to all socialist and communist aspirations which would abolish this social structure. The goal of assistance is precisely to mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that the social structure may continue to be based on this differentiation. If assistance were to be based on the interests of the poor person, there would, in principle, be no limit whatsoever on the transmission of property in favor of the poor, a transmission that would lead to the equality of all. But since the focus is the social whole—the political, family, or other sociologically determined circles—there is no reason to aid the person more than is required by the maintenance of the social *status quo*.

When this purely social and cen-

tral teleology prevails, assistance to the poor offers perhaps the greatest sociological tension between the direct and the indirect goals of an action. The alleviation of personal need is emotionally so categorical an end-in-itself, that to deprive it of this ultimate purpose and to convert it into a mere technique for the transsubjective ends of a social unit constitutes a significant triumph for the latter. This distantiation between the individual and the social unit—despite its lack of visibility—is more fundamental and radical in its abstractness and coldness than sacrifices of the individual for the collectivity in which the means and the ends tend to be bound together by a chain of sentiments.

This basic sociological relationship explains the peculiar complications of rights and duties which we find in modern assistance to the poor by the State. Frequently we find the principle according to which the State has the obligation to assist the poor, but to this obligation there is no corresponding right to assistance on the part of the poor. As has been expressly declared in England for example, the poor person has no recourse to action for unjust refusal of assistance, nor can he solicit compensation for illegally refused assistance. All the relations between obligations and rights are located, so to speak, above and beyond the poor. The right which corresponds to the obligation of the State to provide assistance is not the right of the poor, but rather the right of every citizen that the taxes he pays for the poor be of such a size and applied in such a manner that the public goals of assistance to the poor be truly attained. Consequently, in the case of negligence in assistance to the poor, it would not be the poor who are entitled to take action against the State, but rather the other elements indirectly harmed by such negligence. In case it should be possible, for instance, to prove that a thief might

not have carried out a robbery if the legal assistance requested by him had been granted, it would in principle be the robbed one who would be entitled to claim compensation from the welfare administration. Assistance to the poor holds, in legal teleology, the same position as the protection of animals. No one is punished in Germany for torturing an animal, except if he does it "publicly or in a manner that results in scandal." It is not, therefore, consideration for the mistreated animal but rather for the witnesses that determines punishment.

This exclusion of the poor, which consists in denying them the status of a final end in the teleological chain and, as we have seen, does not even permit them to stand there as a means, is also manifested in the fact that within the modern relatively democratic State public assistance is perhaps the *only* branch of the administration in which the interested parties have no participation whatsoever. In the conception to which we are referring, assistance to the poor is, in effect, an application of public means to public ends; and, since the poor find themselves excluded from its teleology—something that is not the case for the interested parties in other branches of administration—it is logical that the principle of self-government, which is recognized to a varying degree in other matters, should not be applied to the poor and to their assistance. When the State is obligated by a law to channel a stream to provide irrigation for certain districts, the stream is approximately in the situation of the poor supported by the State: it is the object of obligation but is not entitled to the corresponding right, which is rather that of the adjacent property holders. And every time that this centralist interest prevails, the relationship between right and obligation may be altered for the sake of utilitarian considerations. The projected Poor Law of 1842 in Prussia

asserts that the State must organize assistance to the poor in the interest of public prosperity. With this objective, it creates legal public bodies which are obligated to the State to assist needy individuals; but they are not so obligated to the latter since these have no legal claim.

This principle acquires an extreme character when the law imposes upon well-to-do relatives of the poor an obligation of support. It would appear at first sight that in this case the poor hold over their well-to-do relatives a *claim* which the State merely secures and makes effective. The inner meaning is, however, a different one. The political community cares for the poor for utilitarian reasons, and gets compensation from the relatives because the cost of assistance would be excessive, or so it considers it. The law does not take into account any immediate obligation of person to person, for example between a wealthy brother and a poor brother; this obligation is purely moral. The law is concerned only with serving the interests of the community, and it does this in two ways: by assisting the poor and by collecting from relatives the cost of assistance. This is, in effect, the sociological structure of the laws pertaining to support. They do not simply purport to give a legally binding form to moral obligations. This is shown in facts like the following. Undoubtedly, the moral obligation of assistance between brothers is a strong imperative. Nonetheless, when in the first draft of the German Civil Code an attempt was made to give it legal sanction, the explanatory reasons acknowledged the extraordinary harshness of such an obligation, but stated that otherwise the cost of public assistance would be too high. This became manifest in the fact that on occasions the legal quota of maintenance exceeds anything that might be required from an individual and moral point of view. The German Imperial Court of Justice

sentenced an old man to give up all his possessions—a few hundred marks—for the maintenance of a disabled son, although he argued on plausible grounds that he too would be disabled and that this money was his sole resource. It is very doubtful that one can speak in this case of a moral right on the part of the son. But such a right does not concern the collectivity; the only thing it asks is whether it may have recourse to the relatives in order to impose upon them its obligation toward the poor, in accordance with the general norms.

This internal meaning of the obligation to provide support is also symbolized by the manner in which it is carried out in practice. First, the poor man at his request is assisted, and then a search is made for a son or a father who, eventually and in accordance with his economic situation, is sentenced to pay not the entire cost of assistance but perhaps one half or one third. The exclusively social meaning of the legal rule appears also in the fact that the obligation to provide maintenance, according to the German Civil Code, only occurs when it does not "jeopardize" the "status-adequate maintenance" of the person so obligated. It is at least debatable whether in certain cases assistance is not morally obligatory, even when it adds up to the amounts mentioned above. But the collectivity, nonetheless, renounces such demands in all cases, because the downward mobility of an individual from his "status-adequate" position would result in harm to the status structure of society which would appear to transcend in social importance the material advantages derived from forcing him to that contribution. Consequently, the obligation of assistance does not include a right of the poor person vis-à-vis his well-to-do relatives. The obligation of assistance is no more than the general obligation of the State, but transferred to the relatives and without any correspon-

dence to any action or claim whatsoever of the poor person.

The image of a channeled stream which we used previously was, however, inaccurate. For the poor are not only poor, they are also citizens. *As such*, they participate in the rights which the law grants to the totality of citizens, in accordance with the obligation of the State to assist the poor. To use the same image, let us say that the poor are at the same time the stream and the adjacent landowner, in the same sense as the wealthiest citizens could be. Undoubtedly, the functions of the State, which formally stand at the same ideal distance from all citizens, have, insofar as content is concerned, very different connotations, in accordance with the different positions of citizens; and though the poor participate in assistance, not as subjects with their own ends but merely as members of the teleological organization of the State which transcends them, their role in that function of the State, however, is distinct from that of well-to-do citizens.

What matters sociologically is to understand that the special position which the assisted poor occupy does not impede their incorporation into the State as members of the total political unit. This is so despite the fact that their overall situation makes their individual condition the external endpoint of a helping act and, on the other hand, an inert object without rights in the total goals of the State. In spite of, or better yet, because of these two characteristics which appear to place the poor outside the State, the poor are ordered organically within the whole, belong as poor to the historical reality of society which lives in them and above them, and constitute a formal sociological element, like the civil servant or the taxpayer, the teacher or the intermediary in any interaction. The poor are approximately in the situation of the stranger to the group who finds himself, so



to speak, materially outside the group in which he resides. But precisely in this case a large total structure emerges which comprises the autochthonous parts of the group as well as the stranger; and the peculiar interactions between them create the group in a wider sense and characterize the true historical circle. Thus the poor are located in a way outside the group; but this is no more than a peculiar mode of interaction which binds them into a unity with the whole in its widest sense.

It is only with this conception that we resolve the sociological antinomy of the poor, which reflects the ethical-social difficulties of assistance. The solipsist tendency of the medieval type of almsgiving of which I spoke bypassed internally, so to say, the poor to whom the action was directed externally; in so doing, it neglected the principle according to which man must never be treated exclusively as a means but always as an end. In principle, the one who receives alms also gives something; there is a diffusion of effects from him to the giver and this is precisely what converts the donation into an interaction, into a sociological event. But if—as in the case previously cited—the recipient of alms remains completely excluded from the teleological process of the giver, if the poor fulfill no role other than being an almsbox into which alms for Masses are tossed, the interaction is cut short and the donation ceases to be a social fact in order to become a purely individual fact.

As we were saying, neither does the modern conception of assistance to the poor consider the poor as ends-in-themselves; but nevertheless, according to it, the poor, although they are located in a teleological series which bypasses them, are an element which belongs organically to the whole and are—on the basis given—closely related to the goals of the collectivity. Certainly neither now nor in the

medieval form does their reaction to the donation fall to any specific individual; but by rehabilitating their economic activity, by preserving their bodily energy, by preventing their impulses from leading them to the use of violent means to enrich themselves, the social collectivity gets from the poor a reaction to what it has done to them.

A purely individual relationship is sufficient from the ethical point of view and perfect from the sociological point of view only when each individual is an end for the other—although naturally not merely an end. But this cannot be applied to the actions of a transpersonal collective entity. The teleology of the collectivity may quietly pass by the individual and return to itself without resting on him. From the moment the individual belongs to this whole he is placed thereby, from the beginning, at the final point of action and not, as in the other case, outside of it. Although he is denied as individual the character of an end-in-itself, he participates as member of the whole in the character of an end-in-itself which the whole always possesses.

A long time before this centralist conception of the essence of assistance to the poor became clear, its organic role in the life of the collectivity was revealed through visible symbols. In old England, assistance to the poor was exercised by monasteries and ecclesiastical corporations, and the reason for this, as has been duly noted, is that only the property of mortmain possesses the indispensable permanence on which assistance to the poor necessarily depends. The numerous secular donations derived from booties and penances did not suffice to attain this end, because they were not yet sufficiently integrated into the administrative system of the State and they were consumed without lasting results. Assistance to the poor then became based on the only substantial and

fixed point in the midst of social chaos and turmoil; and this connection is shown negatively by the indignation aroused by the clergy sent from Rome to England, because it neglected assistance. The foreign priest does not feel intimately related to the life of the community; and the fact that he does not care for the poor appears as the clearest sign of this lack of connection.

This same link of assistance with the firm substratum of social existence appears clear in the later tie established in England between the poor tax and landed property; and this was cause as much as effect of the fact that the poor counted as an organic element of the land, belonging to the land. The same tendency is manifested in 1861, when part of the welfare charges were legally transferred from the parish to the welfare association. The costs of assistance to the poor were no longer to be carried in isolation by parishes, but rather by a fund to which the parishes contributed in relation to the value of their landed property. The proposition that in order to make a distribution the number of inhabitants should also be taken into consideration was repeatedly and expressly rejected; with it, the individualistic element was completely excluded. A suprapersonal entity, with its substratum in the objectivity of landed property, and not a sum of persons, appeared as the carrier of the obligation to assist the poor. Assistance in this case is so basic to the social group that the local administration only gradually added to this main activity, first the administration of schools and roads, and then public health and the system of registration. Elsewhere, also, the welfare administration has become a basis of political unity because of its success. The North German Confederation decided that in all of the territory of the Confederation no needy person should remain without assistance and that none of

the poor in the Confederation should receive a different treatment in one region than in another. If in England external and technical reasons contributed to establish a link between assistance to the poor and landed property, this connection does not lose its profound sociological meaning when the addition of other branches of administration to public assistance institutions led to the crossing of county boundaries by the welfare associations despite the technical disadvantages involved. It is precisely this contradiction in the technical conditions which makes the unity of sociological meaning even more conspicuous.

Consequently, the conception that defines assistance to the poor as an "organization of the propertied classes in order to fulfill the sentiment of moral duty which is associated with property" is completely one-sided. Assistance is rather a part of the organization of the *whole*, to which the poor belong as well as the propertied classes. It is certain that the technical and material characteristics of their social position make them a mere object or crossing point of a superior collective life. But, in the final analysis, this is the role that each concrete individual member of society performs; about which one can say, in accordance with the viewpoint temporarily accepted here, what Spinoza says of God and the individual: that we may love God, but that it would be contradictory that He, the whole which contains us, should love us, and that the love which we dedicate to Him is a part of the infinite love with which God loves Himself. The singular exclusion to which the poor are subjected on the part of the community which assists them is characteristic of the role which they fulfill *within* society, as members of it in a special situation. If technically they are mere objects, in turn in a wider sociological sense they are subjects who, on the one hand, like all the others,

constitute social reality and, on the other hand, like all the others, are located beyond the abstract and supra-personal unity of society.

Owing to this also it is the general structure of the group that decides the question: Where do the poor belong? If they still exercise any economic activity at all, they belong to the segment of the general economy that includes them. If they are members of a church, they belong to it, insofar as it does not coincide with another group. If they are members of a family, they belong to the personally and spatially defined circle of their relatives. But if they are no more than poor, where do they belong? A society maintained or organized on the basis of tribal consciousness includes the poor within the circle of their tribe. Other societies, whose ethical connections are fulfilled essentially through the Church, will turn the poor over to one or another type of pious associations, which are the answer of the society to the fact of poverty. The explanatory reasons of the German law of 1871 on place of residence for assistance answer this question in the following manner: the poor belong to that community—that is, that community is obligated to assist them—which utilized their economic strength before their impoverishment. The principle just mentioned is a manifestation of the social structure which existed prior to the complete triumph of the idea of the modern State, since the municipality is the place which enjoyed the economic fruits of those who are now impoverished. But the modern mobility, the interlocal exchange of all forces, have eliminated this limitation; so that the whole State must be considered the *terminus a quo* and *ad quem* of all prestations. If the laws actually permit everybody to establish his residence in whatever community he wishes, then the community no longer has an integrated relationship with its inhabitants. If there is no right

to oppose establishment of residence on the part of undesirable elements, one can no longer demand of the community a solidary give-and-take relationship with the individual. Only for practical reasons, and then only as organs of the State—thus read the explanatory reasons of the legislation—do the municipalities have the obligation to take over the care of the poor.

This is, then, the extreme condition which the formal position of the poor has attained, a condition in which their dependence on the general level of social evolution is revealed. The poor belong to the largest effective circle. No part of the totality but the totality itself, to the extent that it constitutes a unit, is the place or power to which the poor as poor are linked. It is only for this circle, which, being the largest, has no other outside it to which to transfer an obligation, that a problem pointed out by the practitioners of welfare in the small corporative entities ceases to exist: the fact that they frequently avoid giving assistance to the poor, for fear that once they have taken care of them they will always have them on their hands. We see manifested here a very important characteristic for human sociation, a trait which might be called moral induction: when an act of assistance has been performed, of whatever type, although it be spontaneous and individual and not demanded by any obligation, there is a duty to continue it, a duty which is not only a claim on the part of the one who receives the assistance but also a sentiment on the part of the one who gives. It is a very common experience that the beggars to whom alms are given with regularity consider these very rapidly as their right and as the duty of the giver, and if the latter fails in this supposed obligation they interpret it as a denial of their due contribution and feel a bitterness which they would not feel against someone who always

denied them alms. There is also the person in better circumstances who has supported for some time a needy person, fixing in advance the period for which he will do so, and who, however, when he stops his gifts, is left with a painful feeling, as if he were guilty. With full consciousness, this fact is recognized by a Talmudic law of the ritual code "Jore Deah": he who has assisted three times a poor person with the same amount, although he had in no way the intention of continuing the assistance, tacitly acquires the obligation of continuing it; his act assumes the character of a vow, from which only weighty reasons can dispense him, such as, for example, his own impoverishment.

The case just mentioned is much more complicated than the related principle, homologous to *odisse quem laeseris*, which says that one loves the one to whom he has done good. It is understandable that one projects the satisfaction of his own good action on the one who has given him the opportunity for it: in the love for the one for whom he has made sacrifices he loves in essence himself, just as in the hate against the one to whom he has done an injustice he hates himself. The sense of obligation that the good action leaves in the doer of good, that particular form of *noblesse oblige*, cannot be explained with so simple a psychology. I believe that, in effect, an *a priori* condition is involved here: that each action of this type—despite its apparent free will, despite its apparent character of *opus supererogationis*—derives from an obligation; that in such behavior a profound obligation is implicit which, in a certain way, is manifested and made visible through action. What happens here is the same as in scientific induction: if the similarity is accepted between a past process and a future one, it is not simply because the first one has this or that structure, but because a *law* can be derived from the first process

that determines it in the same way as it determines any other future process. There must be, therefore, a moral instinct which tells us that the first act of charity already corresponded to an obligation which also demands the second no less than the first action. This is clearly related to the motives which we touched on at the beginning of this study. If, in the final analysis, any altruism, any good action, any self-sacrifice, is nothing but a duty and an obligation, this principle may, in the individual case, be manifested in such a form that any act of assistance is, in its profound sense—if one wishes, from the viewpoint of a metaphysics of ethics—the mere fulfillment of a duty which, naturally, is not exhausted with the first action but rather continues to exist as long as the determining occasion obtains. According to this, assistance given to someone would be the *ratio cognoscendi*, the sign which makes us see that one of the ideal lines of obligation between man and man runs here and reveals its timeless aspect in the continuing effects of the bond established.

We have seen so far two forms of the relation between right and obligation: the poor have a *right* to assistance; and there exists an *obligation* to assist them, an obligation which is not oriented toward the poor as having a right, but toward society to whose preservation this obligation contributes and which the society demands from its organs or from certain groups. But along with these two forms there exists a third, which probably dominates the moral consciousness: the collectivity and well-to-do persons have the obligation to assist the poor, and this obligation has its sufficient goal in the alleviation of the situation of the poor; to this there corresponds a right of the poor, as the correlative end of the purely moral relation between the needy and the well-to-do. If I am not mistaken, the emphasis has shifted

within this relation since the 18th century. The ideal of humanitarianism and of the rights of man, mostly in England, displaced the centralist spirit of the Elizabethan Poor Law, according to which work had to be provided for the poor for the benefit of the community. The ideal of humanitarianism substituted for this principle another one: every poor person has a right to minimal subsistence, whether he wants and is able to work or not. On the other hand, modern assistance, in the correlation between moral duty (of the giver) and moral right (of the recipient) prefers to emphasize the former. Evidently, this form is realized above all by private assistance, in contrast to public assistance. We are attempting now to determine its sociological significance in this sense.

First, we should point out here the already noted tendency to consider assistance to the poor as a matter pertaining to the widest political circle (the State), while initially it was based everywhere in the local community. This ascription of assistance to the smallest circle was, first of all, a consequence of the corporative ties that bound the community. As long as the supraindividual organism around and above the individual had not changed from the municipality to the State and freedom of mobility had not completed this process factually and psychologically, it was the most natural thing in the world for neighbors to assist needy persons. To this may be added an extremely important circumstance for the sociology of the poor: that of all the social claims of a non-individualistic character based on a general quality, it is that of the poor which most impresses us. Laying aside acute stimuli, such as accidents or sexual provocations, there is nothing such as misery that acts with such impersonality, such indifference, with regard to the other qualities of the object and, at the same time, with such an immediate and effective force. This

has given at all times to the obligation of assisting the poor a specific *local* character. Rather, to centralize it in the largest circle and thereby to bring it about not by immediate visibility but only through the general concept of poverty—this is one of the longest roads which sociological forms have had to travel to pass from the immediate sensate form to the abstract.

When this change occurred, whereby assistance to the poor became an abstract obligation of the State—in England in 1834, in Germany since the middle of the 19th century—its character was modified with respect to this centralizing form. Above all, the State maintains in the municipality the obligation to participate in assistance, but considers the municipality as its delegate; local organization has been made into a mere technique in order to attain the best result possible; the municipality is no longer the point of departure, but rather a point of transmission in the process of assistance. For this reason welfare associations are organized everywhere according to principles of utility—for example, in England, they are organized in such a fashion that each of them may support a workhouse—and they have the deliberate tendency to avoid the partiality of local influences. The growing employment of salaried welfare officials works in the same way. These officials stand vis-à-vis the poor much more clearly as representatives of the collectivity from which they receive a salary than do the unpaid officials who work, so to speak, more as human beings and attend not so much to the merely objective point of view as to the human, man-to-man point of view. Finally, a sociologically very important division of functions takes place. The fact that assistance to the poor is still essentially delegated to the municipalities is especially useful for two reasons; first, because every case must be handled individually, something that can only be done by someone close at

hand and with intimate knowledge of the milieu, and second because if the municipality has to grant assistance it also has to provide the money, since it might otherwise hand out the funds of the State too freely. On the other hand, there are cases of need in which bureaucratic handling is not a threat, since action can be determined on the basis of objective criteria: sickness, blindness, deaf-mutism, insanity, chronic illness. In these cases, assistance has a more technical character and consequently the State, or the larger institution, is much more efficient. Its greater abundance of means and its centralized administration show their advantages in those cases where personal and local circumstances have little importance. And aside from the qualitative determination of the direct prestations of the State, there is the quantitative determination that particularly differentiates public from private assistance: the State and, in general, public organizations attend only to the most urgent and immediate needs. Everywhere, and particularly in England, assistance is guided by the firm principle that only the minimum necessary for the life of the poor should leave the purse of taxpayers.

All this is intimately related to the character of collective actions in general. A collectivity which comprises the energies or interests of many individuals can only take into account their peculiarities, when there is a structure with a division of labor whose members are assigned different functions. But when it is necessary to perform a united action, whether through a direct organ or a representative organ, the content of this action can only include that minimum of the personal sphere that coincides with everybody else's. It follows, in the first place, that when expenses are incurred in the name of the collectivity, no more may be spent than what the most thrifty of its members would spend. A community which is acting closely together may allow it-

self to be moved by an impetus of overpowering generosity; but when the will of each individual is not directly known, but has to be inferred by means of representatives, it must be assumed that no one wants to spend more than the strictly necessary. This is not, of course, an unshakable logical necessity—for the contrary thesis would not constitute a logical contradiction—but it corresponds to a psychological dogma which, by the enormous number of its empirical confirmations, has acquired the practical value of the logically demonstrable.

Mass action has the character of a minimum, owing to its need to reach the lowest level of the intellectual, economic, cultural, aesthetic, etc. scale. The law which is valid for all has been designated as the ethical minimum; the logic which is valid for all is the intellectual minimum; the "right to work," postulated for all, can only be extended to those whose quality represents a minimum; affiliation to a party in principle demands that one accept the minimum of beliefs without which it would not exist. This type of social minimum is perfectly expressed in the negative character of collective processes and interests.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the fact that the prestation of the total community in favor of the poor is limited to a minimum is entirely in accordance with the typical character of collective actions. The motive for this—that such an action has as its basis only that which can be assumed with certitude in each individual—is also the second reason for this behavior: the fact that assistance to the poor, limited to a minimum, has an *objective* character. It is

<sup>1</sup> There is a digression here on the negative character of collective behavior which makes no specific reference to poverty. It has been translated by Kurt H. Wolff in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: The Free Press, 1964 [paperback edition; 1st edition, 1950]), pp. 396-401. [Translator's note.]

possible to determine objectively with fair accuracy what is necessary to save a man from physical breakdown. All that exceeds this minimum, all assistance aimed at a positive rise in level, requires less clear criteria and depends on subjective judgments of quantity and quality. I said before that cases of subjectively not-very-differentiated need, and, therefore, not requiring subjective evaluation, are the ones best adapted to State assistance—particularly cases of illness and physical infirmity—while those which have a more individual character are better assigned to the narrower local community. This objective determinability of the need, which favors the intervention of the widest group, is present when assistance is limited to the minimum. We see here again the old epistemological correlation between universality and objectivity. In the field of knowledge, real universality, the acknowledgment of a proposition by the totality of minds—not historical-real, but ideal—is an aspect or expression of the objectivity of this proposition; on the other hand, there may be another proposition which is, for one or many individuals, absolutely certain and possesses the full significance of truth, but lacks this special stamp which we call objectivity. Thus, in practice, one can only in principle request a prestation from the totality on an absolutely objective basis. When the basis is to be judged only subjectively and there is no possibility of a purely objective determination, the demand may be no less pressing and its fulfillment no less valuable, but it will be directed only toward individuals; the fact that it refers to purely individual circumstances requires correspondingly that it be fulfilled by mere individuals.

If the objective point of view goes hand in hand with the tendency to turn over all assistance to the State—a tendency which certainly until now has nowhere been fully realized—the nor-

native measure, whose logical application implies objectivity, is derived not only from the poor but also from the interest of the State. We see manifested here an essential sociological form of the relationship between the individual and the totality. Wherever prestations or interventions are transferred from individuals to society, regulation by the latter tends to be concerned either with an excess or with a deficiency in individual action. In compulsory education the State requires that the individual should not learn too little, but leaves it up to him whether to learn more or even "too much." With the legal work-day, the State provides that the employer should not require too much from his workers, but leaves it up to him whether to ask for less. Thus this regulation always refers only to one side of the action, while the other side is left to the freedom of the individual. This is the scheme within which our socially controlled actions appear; they are limited only in one of their dimensions; society, on the one side, sets limits to their excess or deficiency, while on the other side their deficiency or excess is left to the indefiniteness of subjective choice. But this scheme sometimes deceives us; there are cases in which social regulation includes in fact *both* sides, although practical interest only focuses attention on one side and overlooks the other. Wherever, for example, the private punishment of a crime has been transferred to society and objective criminal law, one only takes into account, as a rule, that thereby one acquires greater certainty in retribution, that is, a sufficient degree and certitude in its application. But, in reality, the goal pursued is not only to punish enough, but also not to punish too much. Society not only protects the person who has suffered damage, but also the criminal against the excess of subjective reaction; that is to say, society establishes as an ob-

jective measure of punishment that which corresponds to its social interest and not to the desires or interests of the victim. And this occurs not only in relations which are legally established. Any social class which is not too low sees to it that its members spend a minimum on their clothing; establishes a standard of "decent" dress; and the one who does not attain this standard will no longer belong to that class. But it also establishes a limit at the other extreme, although not with the same determination nor in such a conscious manner; a certain measure of luxury and elegance and even at times modernity is not proper, indeed, for this or that group, and he who overreaches this upper limit is treated on occasion as not belonging fully to the group. Thus the group does not allow the freedom of the individual to expand completely in this second direction, but rather it sets an objective limit to his subjective choice, that is to say, a limit required by supraindividual life conditions. This fundamental form is repeated whenever the community takes over assistance to the poor. While apparently it seems to have an interest only in setting a lower limit to assistance, that is, in seeing to it that the poor should receive the part to which they are entitled—in other words, that they should not receive too little—there is also the other consideration: that the poor should not receive too much. This latter consideration is in practice less significant. The disadvantage of private assistance lies not only in the "too little," but also in the "too much," which leads to laziness, uses the available means in an economically unproductive way, and arbitrarily favors some at the expense of others. The subjective impulse to do good sins in both directions and, although the danger of excess is not as great as that of deficiency, an objective norm—which determines a standard that is not derived from the

subject but from the interest of the collectivity—is directed against that danger of excess.

The transcendence of the subjective point of view is as valid for the recipient as for the giver. English public assistance, by intervening only when there is an objectively determined absolute lack of means, renounces the investigation as to whether a person deserves assistance. This is so because the workhouse is such an unpleasant experience that no one, except in extreme need, would choose it, and consequently the lack of means is objectively determined. For this reason its complement is private assistance, which is directed to a specific worthy individual and which can select individually, since the State already cares for the most urgent needs. The task of private assistance consists in rehabilitating the poor, who are already protected from starvation, and in curing need, for which the State offers only a temporary alleviation. It is not need as such, the *terminus a quo*, that determines the task of private assistance, but rather the ideal of creating independent and economically productive individuals. The State operates in a causal sense, private assistance in a teleological sense. To put it in other words: the State assists poverty; private assistance assists the poor. A sociological difference of the greatest importance becomes manifest here. Abstract concepts, which crystallize certain elements of a complex individual reality, often acquire life and consequences for practice which would appear to fit only the concrete totality of the phenomenon. This may be seen in very intimate relationships. The meaning of certain erotic relationships cannot be understood in any other way than that one of the parties seeks not the beloved, but love, often with notable indifference toward the individuality of the lover. This is so because what is wished by this person is to receive that emotional value—



love—in and by itself. In religious relationships it often seems that the only essential thing is that there should exist a certain kind and a certain quantity of religiosity, while its carriers are indifferent; the behavior of the priest or the relation of the faithful to the community is determined only by this general consideration, without taking into account the particular motives which produce and color this sentiment in the individual. In this case there is no particular interest in those individuals, since they only matter as carriers of that impersonal fact or rather they do not matter at all. In the social and ethical perspective there is a rationalism which demands that the interaction of people should be based on absolute subjective truthfulness. Everyone may require the truth as an objective quality of any statement made to him, without taking into consideration the particular circumstances or special qualifications of the statement; there can be no right to truth modified in an individual way by those qualifications or circumstances. The truth, and not the speaker or the listener in their individuality, is the assumption, content, and value of group interaction. The same problem is also the basis of divergences among criminologists. Is the punishment directed at the crime or at the criminal? An abstract objectivism demands punishment because a crime has occurred which requires a reinstatement of the violated real or ideal order. It demands punishment based on the logic of ethics, as a consequence of the impersonal fact of the crime. But, from another point of view, only the guilty subject should be punished; the reaction of punishment results not because the crime has occurred as something objective, but because a subject who expressed himself in the criminal act requires expiation, education, and control. For these reasons, in the degree of punishment, the individual circumstances of

the case will have to be taken into account to the same extent as the general fact of the crime.

This twofold attitude may also be adopted with respect to poverty. It is necessary to start from poverty as an objectively determined phenomenon and to attempt to eliminate it as such. Whoever the poor may be and whatever the individual causes that produce it and the individual consequences it produces, poverty requires assistance, compensation for this social deficiency. But, on the other hand, interest may be directed to the poor person, who is assisted unquestionably because he is poor, not for the purpose of eliminating poverty in general *pro rata*, but rather to help this particular poor person. His poverty operates here as an individual and specific characteristic; it serves as the immediate occasion for being concerned with him; but the individual as a whole should be put into such a situation that poverty would disappear by itself. For this reason assistance derived from the first attitude is directed more to the fact of poverty; and assistance derived from the second attitude, on the other hand, to its cause. Incidentally, it is of sociological importance to observe that the natural distribution of the two types of assistance between the State and private individuals is modified as soon as one follows up the causal chain one step further. The State—in England more clearly than elsewhere—meets externally visible need; private assistance attends to its individual causes. But the fundamental economic and cultural circumstances which create those personal conditions can only be changed by the collectivity. The task of changing those circumstances in such a way that they should offer the least chance for impoverishment due to individual weakness, unfavorable propensities, misfortune, or mistakes belongs to the collectivity. Here, as in many other respects, the collectivity, its circumstances, interests,

and actions, surrounds and affects the individual in his specificity. The collectivity represents a kind of immediate reality to which the elements contribute their own existence, the results of their own life. But, on the other hand, it is also the ground in which individual life grows, a ground in which it grows in such a way that the diversity of individual proclivities and situations contributes an endless variety of unique and colorful manifestations to that overall reality.<sup>2</sup>

The principle that governs assistance to the poor in England and which led us to these generalizations is the direct opposite of the French one. In France, assistance to the poor is incumbent upon private associations and persons, and the State only intervenes when these are insufficient. This inversion naturally does not mean that in France private persons would take care of the most pressing needs (like the State in England), while the State would handle what exceeds this minimum and is individually desirable (like private persons in England). What the French principle actually implies is that the two levels of assistance cannot, insofar as content is concerned, be separated as clearly and fundamentally as in England. For this reason, in practice, the condition of the poor will frequently be the same in both countries. But it is obvious that in terms of sociological principles there is a fundamental difference. We are dealing here with a particular case of the larger process, by virtue of which the direct interaction which obtains among the elements of the group becomes an action of the unitary and

supraindividual community; once this has happened, constant compensations, substitutions, and changes in priority result between both types of social arrangements. Should this tension or social disharmony which is manifested as individual poverty be directly resolved among the elements of society or through the unity formed by all the elements? This is a question which has to be decided in a formally similar way for every aspect of society, even though it is only rarely posed with such clarity and purity as here. This is mentioned here only so that we should not forget to what extent "private" assistance is also a social phenomenon, a sociological form, which no less definitely attributes to the poor a position as organic members of group life—something that may escape superficial observation. This fact acquires particular clarity by virtue of the transitional forms between both levels: on the one hand, the poor tax, and, on the other, the legal obligation of assistance to poor relatives. As long as a special poor tax exists, the relationship between the collectivity and the poor does not have the abstract purity which places the poor in a direct relationship with the whole as an indivisible unity; the State is only the intermediary that channels the no longer voluntary individual contributions to their beneficiaries. As soon as the poor tax becomes part of the general tax obligation and the resources of assistance are drawn from the general income of the State or municipality, this relationship between the total community and the poor has reached its full development; assistance to the poor becomes a function of the totality as such, and not of the sum of individuals, as in the case of the poor tax. When the law requires the assistance of needy relatives, the interest of the totality is expressed in even more specialized terms. Private assistance, which in all other cases is also affected

<sup>2</sup> Simmel uses a footnote to expound his basic conception of the relationship between the individual and the social, without any specific reference to the topic at hand. Since this footnote states in metaphorical and highly abstract terms ideas much better presented at length in his basic theoretical writings, we decided to leave it out. [Translator's note.]

by the structure and teleology of the collectivity, here in a conscious over-emphasis is dominated by it.

We said above that the relationship between the collectivity and its poor contributes to the formation of society in a formal sense as much as the relationship between the collectivity and the civil servant or the taxpayer. We are going to develop this assertion from the point of view which we have just reached in our discussion. We compared above the poor person with the stranger, who also finds himself *confronted* by the group. But this "being confronted" implies a specific *relationship* which draws the stranger into group life as an element of it. Thus the poor person stands undoubtedly *outside* the group, inasmuch as he is a mere object of the actions of the collectivity; but being outside, in this case, is only, to put it briefly, a particular form of being inside. All this occurs in society in the same way as, in the Kantian analysis, spatial separateness occurs in consciousness: even though in space everything is separate and the subject, too, as perceiver, is outside of the other things, the space itself is "in me," in the subject, in the wider sense. If we consider things more closely, this twofold position of the poor—as well as that of the stranger—can be found in all elements of the group with mere variations of degree. However much an individual may contribute positively to group life, however much his personal life may be tied with social life and submerged in it, he also stands *vis-à-vis* that totality: giving or receiving, treated well or poorly by it, feeling inwardly or only outwardly committed to it; in short, as part or as object in relation to the social group as subject, to which he nevertheless belongs as a member, as a part-subject, through the very relationships based on his actions and circumstances. This twofold position, which appears logically difficult to ex-

plain, is a completely elementary sociological fact.

We have already seen this in such simple structures as marriage. Each of the spouses, in certain situations, sees the marriage as an independent structure distinct from himself, confronting him with duties and expectations, good things and bad, which proceed not from the other spouse as a person, but from the whole, that makes each of its parts an object, in spite of the fact that the whole consists only of these parts. This relationship, this fact of finding oneself simultaneously within and without, becomes more and more complicated and more and more visible as the number of members of the group increases. And this is true not only because the whole then acquires an independence that dominates the individual, but because the most marked differentiations among individuals lead to a whole scale of nuances in this twofold relationship. The group has a special and different relationship with respect to the prince and the banker, the society woman and the priest, the artist and the civil servant. On the one hand, it makes the person into an object, it "handles" him differently, it subjects him or recognizes him as a power standing against power. On the other hand, the group incorporates him as an element of its life, as a part of the whole, which in turn stands in contrast to other elements. This is perhaps a completely unitary attitude of social reality, which manifests itself separately in these two directions or which appears different from these two distinct viewpoints: comparably, a particular representation stands with respect to the soul, so distinct from it that it can be influenced by the total mood—colored, heightened or toned down, formed or dissolved—while at the same time it is still an integral part of that whole, an element of the soul, of that soul which consists only of the co-existence and interlocking of such rep-

resentations. In that scale of relationships with the collectivity the poor occupy a well-defined position. Assistance, to which the community is committed in its own interest, but which the poor person in the large majority of cases has no right to claim, makes the poor person into an object of the activity of the group and places him at a distance from the whole, which at times makes him live as a *corpus vile* by the mercy of the whole and at times, because of this, makes him into its bitter enemy. The State expresses this by depriving those who receive public alms of certain civic rights. This separation, however, is not absolute exclusion, but a very specific relationship with the whole, which would be different without this element. The collectivity, of which the poor person is a part, enters into a relationship with him, confronting him, treating him as an object.

These norms, however, do not appear to be applicable to the poor in general but only to some of them, those who receive assistance, while there are poor who do not receive assistance. This leads us to consider the relative character of the concept of poverty. He is poor whose means are not sufficient to attain his ends. This concept, which is purely individualistic, is narrowed down in its practical application in the sense that certain ends may be considered as independent of any arbitrary and purely personal decision. First, the ends which nature imposes: food, clothing, shelter. But one cannot determine with certainty the level of these needs, a level that would be valid in all circumstances and everywhere and below which, consequently, poverty exists in an absolute sense. Rather, each milieu, each social class has typical needs; the impossibility of satisfying them means poverty. From this derives the banal fact that in all advanced civilizations there are persons who are poor within their class and would not be poor within

a lower class, because the means they have would be sufficient to satisfy the typical ends of that class. Undoubtedly, it may happen that a man who is really poor does not suffer from the discrepancy between his means and the needs of his class, so that poverty in the psychological sense does not exist for him; just as it may also happen that a wealthy man sets himself goals higher than the desires proper to his class and his means, so that he feels psychologically poor. It may be, therefore, that individual poverty—insufficiency of means for the ends of a person—does not exist for someone, while social poverty exists; and it may be, on the other hand, that a man is individually poor while socially wealthy. The relativity of poverty does not refer to the relation between individual means and actual individual ends, but to the status-related ends of the individual, to a social *a priori* which varies from status to status. The relationship between individual means and actual ends, on the other hand, is something absolute, independent in its basic meaning from anything outside of the individual. It is a very significant socio-historical difference *which* level of needs each group considers as a zero point above which or below which wealth or poverty begins. In a somewhat complex civilization there is always a margin, often a considerable one, to determine this level. In relation to this problem there are many important sociological differences; for example: the relationship of this zero point to the *real average*; whether it is necessary to belong to the favored minority in order not to be considered poor or whether a class, out of an instinctive utilitarian criterion to prevent the growth of feelings of poverty, sets the boundary below which poverty begins very low; or whether an individual case can modify the boundary, as for example the moving into a small town or into a closed social circle of

a wealthy person; or whether the group holds on rigidly to the boundary set between rich and poor.

A result of poverty's being found within all social strata, which have created a typical level of needs for each individual, is that often poverty is not susceptible to assistance. However, the principle of assistance is more extensive than what its official manifestations would indicate. When, for example, within a large family the poorer and richer members give one another presents, the latter take advantage of a good opportunity to give the former a value which exceeds the value of what they have received; and not only that, but also the quality of presents reveals this character of assistance: *useful* objects are given to the poorer relatives, that is, objects which help them to maintain themselves within the level of their class. For this reason, presents from a sociological point of view turn out to be completely different in the various social classes. The sociology of the gift coincides in part with that of poverty. In the gift it is possible to discover a very extensive scale of reciprocal relationships between men, differences in the content, motivation, and manner of giving as well as in that of accepting the gift. Gift, theft, and exchange are the external forms of interaction which are directly linked with the question of ownership and from which an endless wealth of psychological phenomena that determine the sociological process are derived. They correspond to the three motives of action: altruism, egoism, and objective norms; the essence of exchange is in the substitution of some values by others which are objectively equal, while subjective motives of goodness or greed are eliminated since in the pure concept of exchange the value of the object is not measured by the desire of the individual but by the value of the other object. Of these three forms, gift is that which offers the greatest wealth of

sociological situations, because here the intention and position of the giver and of the recipient are combined in the most varied ways with all their individual nuances.

Of the many categories which make possible, so to speak, a systematic ordering of these phenomena, the most important for the problem of poverty seem to be the following basic alternatives. On the one hand, does the meaning and purpose of the gift consist in the final condition achieved by it, in the fact that the recipient will have a valuable specific object, or, on the other hand, does it consist in the action itself, in the gift as the expression of the giver's intention, of a love desirous of sacrifice, or of a reaching out of the self which is manifested more or less arbitrarily by the gift? In the latter case, the process of giving is, so to say, its own ultimate end and the question of wealth or poverty evidently plays no role whatever, except in terms of the practical problem of what people can afford. But when the one to whom one gives is a *poor man*, the emphasis is not on the process but on its results: the main thing is that the poor person receive something. Between these two extremes of the concept of gift there are innumerable mixed forms. The more the latter type predominates in its purest form, the more impossible it often is to give the poor person what he lacks in the form of a gift, because the other sociological relationships between individuals are incongruent with that of giving. The gift is almost always possible when a great social distance intervenes or when a great personal intimacy prevails; but it becomes difficult to the extent that social distance decreases or personal distance increases. In the upper classes, the tragic situation frequently occurs in which the needy person would willingly accept assistance and he who is in a well-to-do position would also willingly grant it; but neither can the

former ask for it nor the latter offer it. In the higher classes the economic *a priori*, below which poverty begins, is set in such a way that this poverty very rarely occurs and is even excluded in principle. The acceptance of assistance thus excludes the assisted person from the premises of his status and provides visible proof that the poor person is formally *déclassé*. Until this happens, class prejudice is strong enough to make poverty, so to say, invisible; and until then poverty is individual suffering, without social consequences. All the assumptions on which the life of the upper classes is based determine that a person may be poor in an individual sense, that is, that his resources may be insufficient for the needs of his class, without his having to recur to assistance. For this reason, no one is socially poor until he has been assisted. And this has a general validity: sociologically speaking, poverty does not come first and then assistance—this is rather fate in its personal form—but a person is called poor who receives assistance or should receive it given his sociological situation, although perchance he may not receive it.

The social-democratic assertion that the modern proletarian is definitely poor but not a *poor man* fits this interpretation. The poor, as a sociological category, are not those who suffer specific deficiencies and deprivations, but those who receive assistance or should receive it according to social norms. Consequently, in this sense, poverty cannot be defined in itself as a quantitative state, but only in terms of the social reaction resulting from a specific situation; it is analogous to the way crime, the substantive definition of which offers such difficulties, is defined as "an action punished by public sanctions." Thus today some do not determine the essence of morality on the basis of the inner state of the subject but from the result of

his action; his subjective intention is considered valuable only insofar as it normally produces a certain socially useful effect. Thus too, frequently, the concept of personality is not defined by an inner characteristic that qualifies the individual for a specific social role, but, on the contrary, those elements of society that perform a specific role are called personalities. The individual state, in itself, no longer determines the concept, but social teleology does so; the individual is determined by the way in which the totality that surrounds him acts toward him. Where this occurs, we find a certain continuation of modern idealism, which does not attempt to define things by an essence inherent to them, but by the reactions that occur in the subject with respect to them. The binding function which the poor person performs within an existing society is not generated by the sole fact of being poor; only when society—the totality or particular individuals—reacts toward him with assistance, only then does he play his specific social role.

This social meaning of the "poor man," in contrast to the individual meaning, makes the poor into a kind of estate or unitary stratum within society. The fact that someone is poor does not mean that he belongs to the specific social category of the "poor." He may be a poor shopkeeper, artist, or employee but he remains in this category, which is defined by a specific activity or position. In this category he may occupy, as a consequence of his poverty, a gradually modified position; but the individuals who, in different statuses and occupations, are in this state are not grouped in any way into a particular sociological whole different from the social stratum to which they belong. It is only from the moment they are assisted—perhaps already when their total situation would normally require assistance, even though it has not yet been given

—that they become part of a group characterized by poverty. This group does not remain united by interaction among its members, but by the collective attitude which society as a whole adopts toward it. However, an explicit tendency toward sociation has not always been lacking. Thus in the 14th century, for example, there was in Norwich a *Poorman's Gild*, and in Germany the so-called "guilds of the miserable." Some time later, we find in the Italian cities a party of the wealthy, of the *Optimates* as they called themselves, whose members were united only by the fact of their wealth. Similar unions of the poor soon became impossible because, with the growing differentiation of society, the individual differences in education and ideas, in interests and background, among those who might have belonged to the unions were too great to lend to such groups the necessary strength for true sociation.

It is only when poverty implies a positive *content*, common to many poor, that an association of the poor, as such, arises. Thus, the result of the extreme phenomenon of poverty, the lack of shelter, is that those who find themselves in such a situation in the large cities congregate in specific places of refuge. When the first stacks of hay arise in the vicinity of Berlin, those who lack shelter, the *Penner*, go there to take advantage of the opportunity to spend a comfortable night. One finds among them a type of incipient organization, whereby the *Penner* of each district have a kind of headman who assigns to the members of the district their places in the night shelter and arbitrates their quarrels. The *Penner* scrupulously see to it that no criminal infiltrates them, and, when this happens, they denounce him to the police to whom they often render good services. The headmen of the *Penner* are well-known persons whom the authorities always know how to find when they

need information about some obscure character. Such a specification of poverty, as the lack of shelter implies, is necessary today to contribute an element of association. Moreover, one may note that the increase of general prosperity, the greater police vigilance and, above all, social conscience which, with a strange mixture of good and bad motives, "cannot tolerate" the sight of poverty, all contribute to impose on poverty increasingly the tendency to hide. And this tendency to hide logically isolates the poor increasingly from one another and prevents them from developing any feeling of belonging to a stratum, as was possible in the Middle Ages.

The class of the poor, especially in modern society, is a unique sociological synthesis. It possesses a great homogeneity insofar as its meaning and location in the social body is concerned; but it lacks it completely insofar as the individual qualification of its elements is concerned. It is the common end of the most diverse destinies, an ocean into which lives derived from the most diverse social strata flow together. No change, development, polarization, or breakdown of social life occurs without leaving its residuum in the stratum of poverty. What is most terrible in poverty is the fact that there are human beings who, in their social position, are just poor and nothing but poor. This is different from the simple fact of being poor which each one has to face for himself and which is merely a shade of another individually qualified position. The fact of being just poor and nothing but poor is particularly apparent where expanding and indiscriminate almsgiving prevails, such as during the Christian Middle Ages and in Islamic lands. However, so long as one accepted it as an official and unchangeable fact, it did not have the bitter and contradictory character which the progressive and activist tendency of modern times

imposes on a whole class: a class which bases its unity on a purely passive characteristic, specifically the fact that the society acts toward it and deals with it in a particular way. To deprive those who receive alms of their political rights adequately expresses the fact that they are nothing but poor. As a result of this lack of positive qualification, as has already been noted, the stratum of the poor, notwithstanding their common situation, does not give rise to sociologically unifying forces. In this way, poverty is

a unique sociological phenomenon: a number of individuals who, out of a purely individual fate, occupy a specific organic position within the whole; but this position is not determined by this fate and condition, but rather by the fact that others—individuals, associations, communities—attempt to correct this condition. Thus, what makes one poor is not the lack of means. The poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means.

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF POVERTY

### *To the Memory of Georg Simmel*

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Discussions of the extent of poverty in a given society usually have been dogged by definitional problems. One man's poverty is another's wealth; minimal standards in a developed industrial society may be viewed as Utopian goals in an underdeveloped one. What may be felt to constitute unendurable deprivation in a society where the underprivileged compare their lot with that of others more favorably placed in regard to the distribution of income and wealth, may be accepted as legitimate in societies where no such comparisons are socially available or culturally sanctioned.

One may argue that a poor man is one whose economic means are not commensurate with the economic ends he seeks; yet this does not stand up under scrutiny. In societies that exhibit a strain toward anomy, a disjunction between the ends that are striven for and the means available for attaining them, boundless appetites forever create new dissatisfactions at every level reached. This seems to be

typical not only of the deprived but of very large strata of the population. The economies of such societies are geared precisely to the creation of ever new needs.

Rather than taking as a point of departure the condition or felt condition of those presumed to be poor, this paper will attempt to provide a different perspective. Following Simmel's lead, poverty will be dealt with as a social category that emerges through societal definition.<sup>1</sup> Just as in Durkheim's view crime can best be defined as consisting in acts having "the external characteristic that they evoke from society the particular reaction called punishment,"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1908, p. 454-493. I have relied very heavily on Simmel's hitherto untranslated essay, "Der Arme," in the above volume. In fact, much of what I say in the first part of this paper is little more than a restatement of some of Simmel's seminal ideas.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1950, p. 35.